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1-1-1979

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Published version. *The Independent Shavian*, Vol. 17, (1979): 16-18. [Publisher Link](#). © 1979 New York Shavians. Used with permission.

Shaw's Vision of God in *Major Barbara*

By Diane Long Hoeveler

Shaw once remarked, "Never believe in a God that you cannot improve upon," and, indeed, that sentiment forms the basis of *Major Barbara*, for the drama outlines the creation, transformation, and recreation of Shaw's notion of "God." Undershaft and Lady Britomart, the old gods, represent the materialistic world their strength has created, but they gradually are replaced by their chosen heirs, Cusins and Barbara, who in their turn will form a new version of humanity as God. We may see *Major Barbara*, then, as a pivotal drama in which Shaw translates his philosophical views into the more accessible and universal language of religious symbols. Shaw's conception of the Life Force is still essentially non-anthropomorphic, but it is now embodied in the main characters, Lady Britomart and Undershaft, Barbara and Cusins.

Major Barbara is, then, a sort of revision of the Bible, the gospel written according to Shaw's religious views. In his creation of Undershaft, Barbara, and Cusins, Shaw rewrites the Old and New Testaments in order to present a humanized deity, humanity as divine. The old covenant, Lady Britomart and Undershaft, are rejected and reborn as Barbara and Cusins, the promise of the new covenant. Many of Shaw's critics have pointed out his debts to both Blake and Shelley. One of the most striking similarities, however, is the concept of deity that Shaw shares with both Blake and Shelley. That is, all three writers endorse a vision of man as God and God as man; humanity's goal is to recognize its divinity through a restoration of the imagination and a reunion of the masculine and feminine principles. Blake and Shelley, therefore, both presented the godhead as androgynous, the union of Albion and Jerusalem, Prometheus and Asia. Shaw follows this pattern in *Major Barbara*, and later made his belief in an androgynous deity explicit when he wrote to Dame Laurentia McLachlan, "I devoutly insist that the God head must contain the Mother as well as the Father."

At the beginning of Act II, Undershaft says to Cusins, "I am a millionaire; you are a poet; Barbara is a savior of souls. What have we three to do with the common mob of slaves and idolators?" The drama, structurally and thematically, centers on the identities of the three main characters as spiritual principles. Although it has been claimed that the three main characters form a sort of Shawian Superman at the end of the play, the emphasis throughout the drama reveals that it is Barbara and Cusins who will form the new deity. Undershaft functions as a sort of instructor, an old way who, because his time has passed must give way to Barbara and Cusins.

In his introduction to the film version, Shaw tells his audience that his drama is a "PARABLE," and he makes this explicit when in Act I Barbara and her father exchange challenges to visit each other's places of work. Barbara tells her father that the Salvation Army shelter is "In West Ham. At the sign of the Cross." Undershaft replies in like manner that his cannon factory is "In Perivale St. Andrews. At the sign of the Sword." This language reveals that the struggle in the play is between the cross and the sword, not so much Christianity and war, but the two systems of belief that Shaw saw as foes to his religion: spirit divorced from body and body divorced from spirit. Shaw's religion, like

Blake's, insisted on the complete interdependence of spirit and body, intellect and imagination, male and female.

Undershaft quite blatantly represents the strength of the body and he functions throughout the drama as both "God" and the "devil," an Old Testament Nobodaddy, and the spirit of Darwinism let loose in the commercial world. He is the appropriate leader during a time of history dominated by the growth of industrialism. He assures his family that his motto might be identical to the Salvation Army's: Blood and Fire, for his religion "must have a place for cannons and torpedoes in it." But a new era of history has begun, an era that does not need to be concerned simply with the most basic of needs. Barbara and Cusins are the more appropriate leaders for this new age, an age in which spiritual needs would not have to be sacrificed for bodily ones.

Shaw presents his belief in spiritual evolution in Barbara, the embodiment of traditional Christianity, although her religious beliefs contain a strong degree of spiritual Lamarckianism. In Act I Barbara's original Christianity allows her to remark, "There are neither good men nor scoundrels: there are just children of one Father. . . . They're all just the same sort of sinner; and there's the same salvation ready for them all." Blake's aphorism "One law for the lion and the ox is oppression" comes to mind, and this truth must be embraced before Barbara can gain the spiritual wisdom she evidences in Act III. But even before that final scene, Barbara reveals a spiritual sophistication in her wooing of Bill Walker's soul. She wants to save him, not only for heaven, but for happiness and productivity in this world. She exhorts him to "Come with us, Bill. To brave manhood on earth and eternal glory in heaven."

If Barbara is spirit and love, Cusins is her complement, embodying the intellect and will. He has been traditionally viewed as a sort of synthesis of Barbara's idealism and Undershaft's realism. But Cusins is not simply a synthesis; rather, he is the spiritual complement of Barbara, the true son of and heir to the godhead. With appropriate irony, when Undershaft first meets his family he mistakes Cusins for his son. Indeed, Cusins and Undershaft have much in common, particularly their tolerant attitude toward the relative merits of all systems of belief. Just as Undershaft believes in money and gunpowder yet tells Barbara that he is a mystic, so does Cusins confess that he is "a collector of religions; and the curious thing is that I find I can believe them all." He further admits to Undershaft that he participates in the Salvation Army because he sees it as "the true worship of Dionysos."

Cusins's religion, like Barbara's, embraces the divinity that is inherent in humanity. Cusins describes his love for Barbara in religious terms: "Dionysos and all the others are in herself. I adored what was divine in her." Barbara and Cusins also share a religion that is an amalgamation of several systems of belief. Cusins tries to explain this to Undershaft when he remarks that, "The power Barbara wields her—the power that wields Barbara herself—is not Calvinism, not Presbyterianism, not Methodism. . . . Barbara is quite original in her religion." Because Undershaft has been able to recognize this quality in his daughter, he has decided on Barbara as his heir: "I shall hand on my torch to my daughter. She shall make my converts and preach my gospel. . . . money and gunpowder. Freedom and power. Command of life and command of death." But Barbara is incomplete in herself; she needs a consort and Cusins fulfills that role by "renouncing" his birth and becoming Undershaft's "son" and heir and Barbara's husband.

Barbara and Cusins, the new deity of this world, do not preach Undershaft's gospel, at least not as it has been preached by him. They will not preside over a Darwinian struggle for the most basic and soulless of existences. When Undershaft insists that the cannon works should provide arms "to all men who offer an honest price for them, without respect of people or principles," Cusins repudiates this attitude by claiming, "I shall sell cannons to whom I please. . . . I have more power than you, more will." Barbara and Cusins do have more "will," more of the Life Force because they represent a new union of spirit and body. Undershaft, as the spokesman for physical Evolution, manages to win Barbara and Cusins to their new mission by appealing to both the spirit and the body. To Barbara he exclaims, "Try your hand on my men: their souls are hungry because their bodies are full." To Cusins he says, "Come and make explosives with me. Whatever can blow men up can blow society up. . . . Dare you make war on war?"

The final scene in Act II, the cause of much debate in the criticism of the play, depicts Barbara and Cusins establishing that new androgynous godhead. Barbara, as feminine principle, represents the spirit, while Cusins, the masculine, embodies will and intellect. Together they form Shaw's conception of God, that is, redeemed and enlightened humanity. Barbara no longer shirks the valid claims of the body in preference to the spirit. She now understands that "life is all one," as does Cusins, who recognizes that "all power is spiritual. You cannot have power for good without having power for evil too." Shaw's religious vision is strikingly similar to Blake's belief that life has to be a marriage of spirit and body, good and evil, heaven and hell. Cusins and Barbara realize this when Cusins asks, "Then the way of life lies through the factory of death?" and Barbara replies, "Yes, through the raising of hell to heaven and of man to God, through the unveiling of an external light in the Valley of The Shadow." Barbara and Cusins embody "man" as "God" and their mission is to raise the hell of their world, with its poverty, violence, and class distinctions, to the heavens of the future. When Cusins tells Undershaft that Barbara has accepted her mission, he also remarks that "She has gone right up into the skies." This ascension, Barbara's final imagistic association with Christ, is symbolic, for we know that the new religion does not allow for an escape from the world, but instead an embrace and transformation of it.

The spirit has become reconciled to the body and the new religion of the twentieth century has therefore become, according to Shaw, a viable system of belief. In his preface to the play Shaw remarked, "Creeds must become intellectually honest. At present there is not a single credible established religion in the world. That is perhaps the most stupendous fact in the whole world-situation." That fact motivated the composition of *Major Barbara*, a comedy of sorts, but primarily a serious attempt to outline the spiritual past and future needs of humanity.

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